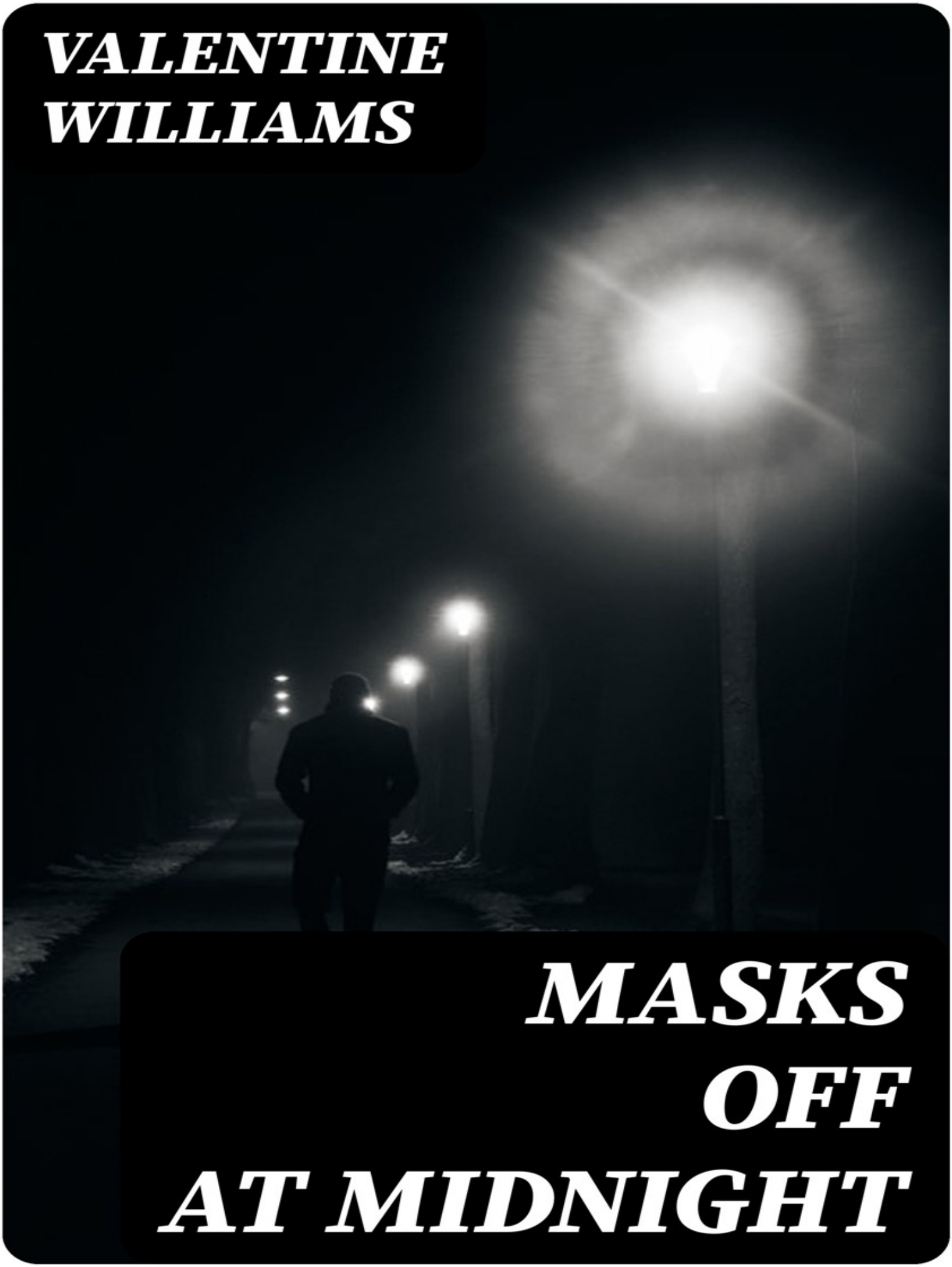
VALENTINE WILLIAMS



MASKS OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Valentine Williams

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CHAPTER I

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Had he but known it, the sandy-haired young man who stood in the shade just inside the open doors of the service station, all the events in Laurel that day were converging on the tragedy of the following night. Not that he could have guessed it from the placid spectacle the main street presented, spread out in the hot morning sunshine. Right and left, under his rather desultory regard, the street lay in the ban of one of those spells of emptiness which occasionally overtake the chief traffic artery of even a town of twenty thousand people. With tail uplifted a thin cat picked its way delicately across the tarmac to a gate opposite, where it paused to contemplate with an attitude of bored indifference the plump robins hopping about on the velvety turf beyond. The air was so still that one could hear the click as the traffic light at the foot of the hill conscientiously changed from green to red. From the shipyard under the bridge, where the Sound poked a long, glittering finger into the heart of the little Long Island town, came the rhythmic sound of hammering.

Across the street the door of the Laurel Real Estate Office opened and two men appeared, one, a heavy, red-faced man in a Palm Beach suit, wearing a hat. Their voices drifted over the stillness to the quiet figure in the garage entrance.

‘Well, petition or no petition,’ the red-faced man was saying, ‘I mean to stop it. And Waverly and the rest of them are with me…’

‘Quite, Mr. Tallifer,’ his companion replied—he was a small, thin-faced individual with a very deferential air. ‘But we’ll need to hurry—from what I hear he’ll lose no time in submitting it to the court…’

‘Leave that to me, Denny,’ the other rejoined firmly. ‘I’m going to the lawyer’s now. Mrs. Tallifer is shopping in town—she said she’d pick me up with the car at Jackson’s.’ He nodded to the other and stepped into the brilliant sunshine.

Catching sight of the figure in the garage doorway he waved his hand. ‘Good morning, good morning,’ he called across the road. ‘We’re seeing you and your lady at lunch, don’t forget!’ ‘Rather!’ the young man called back, and Henry Tallifer, large and rather condescending, with his big head and features clear-cut in a solid way, like a Roman emperor’s, strolled composedly up the street.

The belfry of the Episcopalian Church, thrusting its clean, gray stones above the clump of maples at the top of the hill, began to strike. The walker halted and took out his watch. He liked to hear the belfry sound the hours—it was a Tallifer telling the town the time. Presently, on gaining the crest of the slope, he would stop again and contemplate the stone let into the foot of the tower—‘This belfry was presented by Henry Tallifer, in memory of his mother, Edith Parton Tallifer, benefactrix of this town, 1896.’

The clock struck eleven. At the garage entrance the young man, counting the strokes, smothered a yawn. He was bareheaded and the July sunshine struck high lights on his flaming copper hair and the lenses of the large, horn-rimmed spectacles he wore. His blue jacket was irreproachable, his white flannels and shoes, spotless; but

he was the sort of young man who looks untidy in whatever he wears. If one had not known him for a stranger to Laurel, it would have been evident from the attitude of a youth in grubby jeans who, propped against the wall just inside the garage doors, jaws moving silently, was eyeing him with an air of rapt absorption.

For the time being the stranger paid no heed to this scrutiny. He was thinking that, although he was three thousand miles from London, Laurel seemed to be as sleepy as any country town at home. There, however, the resemblance ended. Laurel knew no Queen Anne façades, no gabled houses, no thatch. Its shops, for the most part, were replicas of the shops in the cheaper parts of New York. With their garish window displays, their winking electric signs, red and green and blue, their slot-machines and magazine-stands at the doors, they looked grotesquely out of place beside the old colonial houses which still lined the street in places.

It was the homes with their white-pillared fronts and long, cool verandahs and glimpses of lawn spread out under majestic, hoary trees, which lent Laurel a placid, Old-World atmosphere that defied the challenge of commerce. The shops, the brand-new Doric bank, the luncheon counter baldly announcing ‘Eats’ in Neon light, the drug-store placarded with ‘breakfast specials,’ they seemed like upstarts that had crept in by stealth and installed themselves there, impudently, overnight. Notwithstanding the shops, the new bank, and the traffic light, notwithstanding the fact that New York was no more than an hour away by car, Laurel was still what it was when George

Washington, as the legend ran, had spent the night at Hazard House there—a drowsy, little country town.

The service station with its row of pumps and concreted forecourt was smart and up to date. Sundry sounds coming from within the large, well-lit interior—the clank of machinery belting, the scream of a lathe—showed that it was mechanically well-equipped. The young man, turning from his contemplation of the quiet street to survey it, found himself under the unyielding gaze of the worker in overalls. He was not embarrassed. With imperturbable mien he made a cursory inspection of himself and his attire and, seemingly satisfied with his scrutiny, gravely devoted himself to the task of staring the other out.

A grubby mechanic, a goblin-like figure of indeterminate age, emerged from the garage.

‘Are you Mr. Trevor Dene?’ he said hoarsely to the customer.

With a faintly bored expression the young man shifted his eyes from the youth in overalls. ‘Yes, indeed,’ he replied.

‘You’re wanted on the ’phone,’ the mechanic announced.

‘Is that you, Trevor?’ said a voice when Dene took the call —a girl’s voice, crisp and clear.

‘My senses’ idol!’ exclaimed Mr. Dene.

‘Are you aware that it’s eleven o’clock, that we promised to take those books over to Aunt Julia at Rosemount before lunch, and that we’re lunching with the Henry Tallifers at the Yacht Club at one?’

‘Nancy, sweetness, I…’

‘Does it really take an hour and a half to get a tire repaired, even in Laurel?’

‘My soul’s delight, I had a blow-out coming here. That makes two tires instead of one…’

‘I think it’s too bad of you to keep me waiting…’

‘*I* think we want a brace of new tires. But, hold your horses, honey, I shan’t be long now. The gnome in waiting’s on the job…’

‘Please hurry up. You know what Aunt Julia is. We can’t dash in and out as if we were going to a fire…’

‘Nancy…’

‘What?’

‘How long have we been married?’

‘Two years, isn’t it?’

‘No more, no less. Shall I tell you something extraordinary?’

‘No! Chase those garage people instead!’

‘I’ve run them ragged. Twice the gnome has knocked off work to have a good cry. He says he envies Uncle Tom who had only Legree to deal with…’

‘You’re an idiot!’

‘You’re sweet. I was going to tell you, we’ve been married for two years and the sound of your voice still sends shivers up my spine…’

‘Anyone would think I was Dracula. It’s odd, Mr. Dene, but I kind of like you, too. But I won’t if you keep me waiting much longer!’

‘I fly on the wings of desire!’ said Mr. Dene. And hung up.

Crouched on the garage floor the gnome-like mechanic was dealing flail-like blows at a tire. Outside the youth in overalls had not budged from his position. On Dene’s

reappearance he proceeded to resume his prolonged and silent survey of the customer.

At length, shifting his gum, he said, ‘Stayin’ over to Heathfield, are you?’

‘That’s right,’ said Dene.

‘For the costoom ball tomorrow, likely?’

‘That’s right,’ said Dene again.

The youth’s eye rested on him stolidly. ‘Didn’t I see Miss Ayleswood as was, that used to live over to Rosemount, ridin’ by with Mrs. Waverly yesterday?’

‘It’s quite possible,’ Dene agreed. ‘She’s staying with the Waverlys at Heathfield, too!’

‘Married an Englishman, didn’t she?’

‘I believe so!’

The youth nodded impressively. ‘There was a piece in the paper about it. It said he was a famous detective. From Scotland Yard. Is he staying there, too?’

‘I believe so!’

The other removed his gum and dropped it in the road. ‘I never saw a Scotland Yard man, ’cept in the movies. What’s he like?’

Dene shrugged. ‘It’s hard to say. You see, he’s mostly in disguise…’

The youth stared at him. ‘No kiddin’?’

‘No kidding!’ was the imperturbable rejoinder.

A young man in a light suit came swinging blithely up the hill. He was fair-haired and fresh of face with a serene, merry expression. As he passed he nodded to Dene’s companion. ‘Grand day, Harry!’ he called out.

‘Hiyya, Paul!’ the youth returned phlegmatically. ‘That’s Paul Kentish who edits our newspaper,’ he explained. ‘It’s he who’s getting up the show for the Waverlys’ ball…’ He pointed up the hill to where ‘The Laurel Advertiser’ was strung up in tarnished gold letters across the front of a two-story building. ‘That’s th’ office. The paper don’t come out but once a week—Saturdays. Thursdays and Fridays, Paul’s kinda busy, gittin’ his news together. Else he mostly always stops fer a talk. A feller picks up a heap o’ news round a gas station,’ he added self-consciously.

A small convertible had glided to a halt outside the garage. It was a woman’s car—the gay chintz covers, the nosegay of fresh roses in a silver holder on the dash, proclaimed as much. A dainty figure was at the wheel, in white with a floppy Leghorn hat and beige gauntlet gloves. A pair of vivid emerald-green eyes, oddly slanted, looked out coolly from under the broad-brimmed hat, eyes that went well with a milky skin and hair that had the rich, reddish glow of Australian gold.

The youth hurried forward.

‘Five gallons, please, Harry,’ the woman said.

‘It’s the high test you have, isn’t it, Mrs. Harrington? Or is it the regular?’

‘The high test, please!’ Expertly she backed her car towards the pump.

Her voice was low and thrilling. The Englishman was immediately conscious of its effortless allure which had galvanized the garage helper into flustered, servile activity. She gave Dene the briefest of glances and then fell to arranging her scarf; but in the instant in which their eyes

met he felt the thrust of an unusual personality. With her dazzling skin and vivid colouring he found her as brilliant as a bird of paradise and reflected idly that in a small community of that kind a woman of her type might be as potentially dangerous as a packet of dynamite. She was expensively but quietly dressed, and evidently well-bred. He wondered who she was.

‘Has Mr. Hordern been by this morning, Harry?’ she asked as she paid the bill.

The youth shook his head. ‘Not that I know of, Mrs. Barrington. He didn’t catch the nine-seven, for I was down at the depot when it pulled out—that’s his regular train, ain’t it?’

She made no answer, but smiling at him absently, put the car in gear and drove away.

‘Who’s the pretty lady?’ Dene wanted to know.

The youth wagged his head knowingly. ‘Some baby, whew! That’s Mrs. Harrington. She’s a widow and lives in one of the bungalows up on the golf course...’

A long maroon Rolls was crossing the bridge. Effortlessly it shot up the hill. A man in a gray suit was inside, reading a newspaper, so that he failed to notice the youth’s rather shambling salute. It was a fantastically sumptuous car, a stream-lined cabriolet, powerfully engined, dark maroon in colour and gleaming with nickel plating. A chauffeur in smart plum-coloured livery, harmonizing with the general colour scheme of the car, was driving.

‘Nice bus,’ said Dene. ‘Who’s that?’

His companion chortled. ‘You ain’t been in Laurel long if you don’t know Brent Hordern...’

Dene swung round to gaze after the fast-receding car. ‘Was that Brent Hordern—Brent Hordern, the millionaire?’

‘Sure!’

‘But I know him. What’s he doing in Laurel?’

‘He lives here. Up at the Ridge House—after the Waverly place it’s about the biggest place round here!’

‘Well, I’m jiggered. What does he do?’

The youth sniggered. ‘He owns most of Laurel, I guess. This gas station is his, and the bank, and the power station, and a block of shops right here on the main street…’

‘You don’t tell me!’

‘Yeah, and I’ll tell you somep’n else, mister—he’ll put this old burg on the map before he’s through!’

He spoke boastfully as though Brent Hordern, in his fifteen-thousand-dollar Rolls, was something he owned and was proud of. For that the future is mercifully veiled from men’s eyes, neither he nor his listener divined that he spoke with the tongue of prophecy, that, ere forty-eight hours were run, the name of Brent Hordern and of the obscure Long Island township, where he was to meet his death, would be emblazoned on the front page of every newspaper in the country. But now, the gnome appearing with the car, Dene paid his bill, and drove off at breakneck speed to Heathfield to pick up his wife.

CHAPTER II

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The staircase at the *Advertiser* office was dark and smelt of printer's ink. Paul Kentish went up it two steps at a time. Arrived in his shabby sanctum on the first floor, he sent his hat sailing across the room to land on a peg on the wall, surveyed his littered desk and called out 'Oh, Miss Bernstein!'—all in one movement.

Miss Bernstein, small and dark and bespectacled and not half a year out of Laurel High School, came in. She was a girl with a one-way mind. The repository of all messages and telephone calls during Kentish's frequent absences from the office, it was her habit, as soon as the editor appeared, to reel off a *précis* of all communications awaiting his attention in a toneless, unhurried voice. It was as though she had learned a piece by rote. Kentish knew better than to try to stop her. Before answering any questions she had to get this accumulation of pending business out of her system.

Before she had crossed the threshold she had begun to speak: 'Good morning, Mr. Kentish. The printer was in and he's short of a column and a quarter on page three and please what time were you expecting the flower show results because Hermann's waiting to go to press with the Garden page and Mr. Waverly would like you to call him just as soon as you arrive and Mr. Harding's compliments and he wishes to see you with reference to last week's "Just Folks" and I paid thirty-nine cents on a parcel and will you be lunching at Tony's because Mr. Brewster from Hicksville was in and said he might see you there!'

Kentish was emptying his pockets of a collection of scribbled notes and memoranda. ‘What’s eating the boss?’ he demanded absently. ‘Another complaint, is it?’

The secretary nodded serenely. ‘I guess so. Mrs. Fowler’s been complaining about that paragraph about her at the chicken dinner at the Presbyterian Hall…’

Kentish grinned. ‘We only said she ate her chicken in her fingers. What’s wrong with that? It’s a good old American custom, isn’t it?’

‘She says you’re conducting a—a vendetta against her. She says we made fun of her at the Boy Scout Rally, too. Anyway, she complained to Mr. Harding, Miss Turner told me…’

Kentish sat down and, picking up the telephone, rapidly dialled a number. ‘My respects to my esteemed employer,’ he remarked through the whirring of the disc, ‘and Mrs. Fowler is an old haybag. Before he wastes his time and mine passing on any more ridiculous complaints, I’d suggest he take a look at last month’s advertising revenue. Oh, hello, Swain,’ he said into the telephone, ‘is Mr. Waverly there? Yes, this is Mr. Kentish. He rang me!’

‘One moment, Mr. Kentish, sir,’ a suave English voice responded. ‘Mr. Waverly’s in the study. I’ll put you through!’

‘Listen, Ran,’ said Kentish as soon as Waverly’s cheery ‘Hello, Paul!’ had told him that Randolph Waverly was at the other end of the wire, ‘about tomorrow night. I’ve been on to New York about the sedan chair and they’ll deliver it sometime this afternoon without fail in time for the dress rehearsal tonight. I told ’em to bring it to the garden entrance—you know the southeast turret—and I want you to

tell Swain to have it put in the Tower Room, to lock the room and let me have the key or else we'll have people snooping in there and the secret will be out. Is that okay?'

'Yes, I'll see Swain about it. What have you done about the carbines for the escort?'

'That's all fixed up. There's no hurry about it—they won't be sending them round from the armoury until tomorrow evening. Meanwhile, the masqueraders will use the Tower entrance and assemble in the Blue Room, right?'

'Okay. I thought you were coming over this morning?'

'I am just as soon as I've finished my column. You're taking the Denes to lunch with the Tallifers, aren't you?'

'Yep.'

'I'm going, too. I'm anxious to meet your sleuth—he ought to be good for a par. But I'll see you before then. In the meantime, rehearsal for the dances at eight o'clock tonight and dress rehearsal at nine. Constance Barrington promised me to have her costume there on time.'

'An affair with gold trousers, is it?'

'Yes...'

'It just arrived, Barbara says. Constance is coming in before dinner for a last fitting...'

'Good. I'll be right along. Bye-bye!' Kentish hung up.

Without an instant's pause he swung his swivel chair round to a battered typewriter that was screwed to a slab projecting from the desk, inserted a sheet of copy-paper, typed '*P.K.*' in the right-hand corner and below '*Add "Just Folks*."'' Then, after a preliminary scrabble among his notes, he began to write.

‘Just Folks’ was the title of the gossip column which, following the precedent of metropolitan journalism, he had succeeded in grafting upon the old-established and, until his advent, extremely ponderous *Advertiser*. Nobody quite knew why Kentish, with Groton and Harvard as his background, should have been content, at the age of twenty-five, to bury himself alive, as his father in Philadelphia put it, as the editor of an obscure Long Island newspaper. But then Paul’s career in journalism had been, from the outset, the despair of his family. Rejecting an offer to join the staff of the staidest of the Philadelphia newspapers, on leaving college he had gone to New York and without influence, and the depression notwithstanding, talked himself into a job on the most sensational and harum-scarum of the tabloids. Two years of newspaper work in New York had fired him with the ambition to become his own master. As a stepping-stone to the attainment of this goal he had deliberately chosen the Laurel *Advertiser*, which, after almost a century of existence, was slowly but surely slipping downhill into bankruptcy. The investment of the whole of his available capital secured him the editorship in succession to an alcoholic son-in-law of Harding, the elderly and muddling proprietor, and the promise of a free hand, and while his methods frequently scandalized the owner, the slowly mounting curve of the *Advertiser* revenue went far to reconcile Harding to hard-hitting editorials on local politics and the incorrigible personalities of his young editor’s best beloved brain-child ‘Just Folks.’

For a good ten minutes the ancient typewriter rattled like a machine-gun. With a guttural ‘Goot morning, Paul!’ the

German printer appeared and retired with the Flower Show copy and a sheaf of book notes which had arrived by the morning mail. Miss Bernstein looked in with the news that Mr. Harding was asking for Mr. Kentish. But the young man paid no heed, pounding away at the typewriter keys. He smiled a good deal as he wrote, pausing only to crush out a cigarette and light another, while he glanced through the sheet in the machine.

At last he had finished. In answer to his shout Miss Bernstein tripped in. ‘Printer!’ said the young man, giving her the typewritten sheets and, as she retired, picked up the telephone and furiously dialled a number.

‘Laurel House,’ a woman’s voice answered.

‘Is that you, Jennie?’ Kentish said eagerly.

‘She’s out, I think, Paul,’ the woman replied.

‘Oh, hello, Mrs. Tallifer! If she’s not there, it doesn’t matter!’

‘She spoke of going to play golf. Wait a second! Here she is!’

A girl’s voice, warm and caressing, now spoke. ‘Hello, Paul!’

His voice, eager and tender, seemed to echo her tone. ‘’Lo, Jen! Up bright and early, aren’t you?’

‘I thought I’d play a round of golf before lunch. This life is getting me down. Why don’t you come along?’

‘Wouldn’t I love to? But Thursday’s my busy day—besides, I have this darned pageant on my neck!’

‘How’s it coming, Paul?’

‘All right. Will your costume be ready for the dress rehearsal tonight?’

‘I hope so. I’m seeing about it this afternoon.’

‘Did you get to bed all right last night?’

‘Yes. What time was it?’

‘I dunno. Round five, I guess. It was fun, wasn’t it?’

‘Uh-huh. You’re good on a party, Paul!’

‘To hell with the party! I was thinking of you and me, out in the outboard motor together!’

She gave a little crooning laugh. ‘It was kind of nice under the moon. But that was last night. I can’t feel very sentimental on a glorious morning like this.’

Paul sighed. ‘I can, Jen. Well, see you at lunch. You’re going, aren’t you?’

‘Sure. At the Yacht Club at one. I must run now if I’m to get any exercise!’

‘Slow back and keep your eye on the ball...’ With a thoughtful, rather weary air, he replaced the receiver and went upstairs to the proprietor’s office.

Ezekiah Harding was a dingy, harassed-looking old man. He wore a short, yellowish-white beard, a black broadcloth suit of ancient cut and gold spectacles. His office was as drab as himself, with grimy, ink-spotted furniture and discoloured walls hung with posters turned out by the private printing works which was part of the *Advertiser* business.

‘Ah, Paul,’ he said, handing the editor a letter from the desk, ‘we must be a little more careful about the gossip column. Mustn’t be too personal. Our subscribers don’t like it!’

The old buzzard, Kentish said to himself. Why can’t he bawl a fellow out and be done with it, instead of this allusive

method of approach? He had the greatest contempt for Harding who would have liked to bully his editor as he bullied Miss Turner, his elderly and acidulous secretary. But Paul Kentish with his good clothes and pleasant, easy manners left the small-town tradesman slightly bewildered and he was always careful to treat him with the greatest respect.

Kentish read the letter through in silence and handed it back. ‘What do you want me to do about it?’ he demanded rather truculently.

The old gentleman rubbed his hands together with a nervous movement. ‘Perhaps we might drop Mrs. Fowler from our columns for a bit, since she speaks of a vendetta…’

Kentish shrugged. ‘I dare say the paper will survive it!’

Harding seemed relieved. ‘Very good, ah, very good!’ He motioned to a chair. ‘Sit down, Paul, there was something else…’ And as the young man, with a markedly suspicious air, took the chair he indicated, he went on, taking a galley proof from his desk, ‘It’s about this editorial of yours, I mean the one about the Laurel Ridge incorporation scheme…’

The editor struck out his chin. ‘Well, what about it?’

Old Harding plucked at his beard. ‘We go a little far, I think. “Deliberate tax-dodging,” “impudent flouting of the opinion of all decent-minded people”—strong language, Paul!’

‘It’s not nearly strong enough, if you ask me. This incorporation racket has gone far enough. If rich men in other parts of Long Island have been able to get away with it, it’s because there’s been no organized body of public opinion, no courageous newspaper, to fight them…’

‘Quite, quite. But the tone of this article...’

Kentish’s blue eyes grew angry. ‘This attempt to separate an integral part of Laurel from the rest of the town for administrative purposes is a matter of public interest. The *Advertiser* has the right, indeed it has the duty, to comment on it...’

Old Harding cleared his throat. ‘Whether the proposed incorporation is justifiable is a matter of controversy...’

‘Rubbish. It stands to benefit one person, and one person only, as you know...’

The other fidgeted with the proof. ‘That may be. All the same, I’d like you to read your editorial through again and, ahem, see if you can’t tone it down a little. Eh, my boy?’ He held out the printed slip.

Kentish had stood up. Now he put his hands behind his back. ‘I can’t do that, Mr. Harding...’

‘We can’t print it as it stands,’ the old man cried stubbornly. ‘It’s nothing but a veiled attack on Mr. Hordern!’

‘And supposing it is,’ the editor retorted with considerable briskness. ‘It’s he who’s trying to put this racket over, isn’t it?’

‘Mr. Hordern spends a great deal of money in the town. We don’t want to antagonize him...’

‘You mean he spends money with us for the bank printing, don’t you? It doesn’t amount to so much. We can do without it...’

‘Brent Hordern is one of our leading citizens...’ He broke off, fumbling with his glasses. ‘Moreover, this business is under certain obligations to him...’

‘You mean, the note at the bank?’

‘Exactly!’

‘To hell with him!’ exclaimed Kentish violently. ‘If the worst comes to the worst, we can transfer the account elsewhere, can’t we? The whole town’s on our side in this fight, Mr. Harding—we’re building up good will, you have to think of that!’

‘This editorial must be altered,’ the old proclaimed tremulously.

‘Not by me,’ said Kentish firmly. ‘This fellow who’s come busting in here with his money can buy the bank, and the power station, and God knows what else, but he can’t buy me! However, it’s your paper and if you insist on soft-pedalling on one of the most barefaced and impudent attempts at tax-dodging this town has ever known, go ahead! But don’t ask me to crawl to Brent Hordern, for I won’t do it!’

With which he strode out of the proprietor’s room.

CHAPTER III

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People still turned to stare and curtains were stealthily parted on Constance Barrington's rare appearances in the main street of Laurel. They never seemed to have their fill of gazing at the chic and attractive widow who, four months before—vaguely to the town's resentment—had suddenly installed herself and her two small children in the so-called Yellow Bungalow on the golf course. It was known that, although American by birth, she had spent the whole of her eight years of married life in Europe where, up to his death six months before, her husband had been a secretary in the American Diplomatic Service. Beyond these sparse facts, and certain rumours upon which the town gossips fastened with avidity, nothing had transpired about her and certainly nothing was to be elicited from the cold and somewhat patronizing manner of the woman herself.

Driving away from the service station, Constance Barrington found herself thinking of the obvious Englishman she had seen there—she wondered whether he was the guest from London Barbara Waverly had said she was expecting. The sight of him with his pipe and his slightly self-conscious, reserved English air gave her a little twinge of homesickness for London in July—she had a sudden vision of the red coats of the Guards marching up the Mall, of the blaze of flowers under the trees beside the Row. It was just another of those incidents, she told herself, which reminded her of how utterly lost she felt in a small American town after the spacious existence of London and Paris. It gave her

a sense of self-sacrifice. If she could have afforded on her restricted means to bring the children up in New York, it would not have been so bad. But the thought of the three of them cooped up in a poky apartment was unbearable; besides, she was unwilling to expose Ann and John to the promiscuity of a New York public school.

She left Ann's coat at the cleaner's at the top of the hill. The A. and P. shop where she called next to give her weekly order for stores was crowded with women shopping. She was aware that these placid housewives resented her dazzling looks, her well-groomed air, the very faint fragrance that was wafted with her—it made her give her order to the friendly Irish boy who waited on her abruptly, disdainfully, and in a voice which, mischievously, she made as English-sounding as possible. The shopman carried her parcel out to the car for her and she sailed out in front of him, delighting in the rancorous silence which sent her on her way.

From the sidewalk before the store she saw the maroon Rolls-Royce drawn up before the bank. A moment later she had halted alongside it.

Recognizing her the chauffeur, sitting stiffly in the driving-seat, touched his cap. 'Good morning, Madame,' he said with a faint foreign inflection of the voice.

'Good morning, Ivan,' she replied, resting her arm on the window-ledge beside her. 'Is Mr. Hordern back from New York?'

The chauffeur's face was inflexible. He was a striking-looking man. A straight, thin nose and a pair of jet-black eyes lent his olive-skinned countenance an almost ascetic

expression and he wore his discreet uniform with quite a distinguished air. ‘Yes, Madame,’ he said stolidly.

A tiny furrow appeared between the delicately pencilled eyebrows. ‘When did he get back?’ she asked quickly.

‘Last night, Madame!’

She gazed down at her gloved hand as it lay on the steering-wheel. ‘Last night?’ she repeated in a puzzled voice. ‘But the butler told me when I telephoned...’ She broke off. ‘Did he dine at home?’

The chauffeur looked at her intently. ‘Madame knows that Mr. Hordern does not like his movements discussed. But I can tell Madame, yes, he dined at home.’

She was silent, the proud face a mask. Then she moved her head in the direction of the bank. ‘Is he inside?’ she questioned rather tensely.

‘Yes, Madame!’ The man paused, affecting to be busy in rubbing with his black gauntlet at a spot on the gleaming vulcanite of the driving-wheel. ‘Madame will understand that I do not presume to offer Madame advice, but’—he shot her a tentative glance out of the corner of his eyes—‘Mr. Hordern is in a great hurry this morning. Madame would only be losing her time to wait. If she would like me to give him a message...’

The woman said nothing. But her rather full mouth was set in a firm line emphasizing the strength of the small chin. Her daintily shod foot sought the accelerator and she slowly drove the car to the kerb, parking it in front of the Rolls. Then with a determined air she got out and crossed the sidewalk to the steps of the bank where she stood for a moment, hesitant.

A moment later the bank door swung open and a burly figure in gray came storming out.

‘Brent,’ she said and put out her hands.

‘Why, hello, Constance,’ he answered jovially. ‘Isn’t this a grand morning? What are you doing in town so early?’

‘I took the children to school, then I did some shopping...’

Her green eyes were fastened on him eagerly. ‘Brent, why did your butler say you were still away when I called you last night?’

His face was full of solicitude. ‘He never told me you rang me!’

‘Then—then it wasn’t by your orders?’

He laughed. ‘Of course not, honey. Now I come to think of it, I did tell Walters I didn’t want to be disturbed. But that doesn’t go for you...’ He glanced up at the church clock. ‘Constance, you’ll have to excuse me now. I was due at the *Advertiser* office at eleven—I’ve got to run!’

‘When am I going to see you, Brent? It’s a whole week!’

‘I’ll call you later, honey...’ He began to walk towards the car.

‘Don’t you want to lunch with me? I asked Miriam Forbes to lunch at the Yacht Club, but I can put her off!’

‘Honest, Constance, I haven’t the time...’ He had reached the car now and spoke to the chauffeur. ‘*Advertiser* office, Ivan, and step on it—I’m late!’ Without more ado he dived into the car and pulled the door to behind him.

A subtle change had come over the woman’s face, a kind of sharpening of the features. Her green eyes glittered strangely. She was staring through the open door of the car. A bag of golf sticks was propped against the door. ‘You’re